Making Complex Writing Intelligible with the Known-New Contract

A sentence can be divided into two parts: a **topic** and a **stress** position. The topic is first part of the sentence, the stress is last.

Below is an example sentence with the topic and stress positions labeled.

**Accounts of depression** evolved after psychologists introduced **the concepts of defeat and entrapment**.

Readers expect to find different types of information in the topic and stress positions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Stress</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In the <em>topic position</em>, readers • expect to understand what the sentence is about • try to connect the sentence to what they've already read</td>
<td>In the <em>stress position</em>, readers • expect to see new and important ideas and information • focus most of their interpretative effort</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The Known-New Contract**

The known-new contract suggests that comprehension is increased when the topic position of a sentence contains information that links back to what the reader already knows and the stress position contains new information that the writer wants to emphasize.

Notice how the following example uses the known-new contract to create a coherent flow of ideas.

**Accounts of depression** evolved after psychologists introduced **the concepts of defeat and entrapment**. These concepts have been implicated in theoretical accounts of anxiety and suicide. Such theories...